

THE PRODUCTION "TO BE OR NOT TO BE? THAT IS THE QUESTION"

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To be a Drama Teacher in my experience means being a teacher of a vast array of subjects: Drama, English, SoH, Journalism, Community Arts, as well as taking on the following roles: Magazine Compiler, Production Producer, Director, Playwright, or as commonly referred to, "Classroom Teacher". Drama Teacher by definition: The act of martyrdom beyond the call of any "sensical" (a new word meaning: with the close relation of the Drama Teacher not being able to be related to the term sensible but rather being more akin to the whimsical and nonsensical form of the term derived from the term Nonsensical as it's true oppositional form) duty. The Drama teacher doing too much? Or a passionate artist? When it comes to the production, we often do 'it' for the love of 'it' and because we can't seem to NOT do 'it'. We are unashamedly an advocator for the school production. It is however time to stop doing favours and give the production the status for the sake of the future of education.

We know that research has been successful in showing that Drama is a powerful educational experience in assisting the education of the whole person. Drama gives us confidence; it allows us a voice, and voice control and all sorts of amazing attributes. This is not by any means a new phenomenon, after all sayings throughout history have continually pointed to the format in which Drama is taught:

"Tell me and I will forget.
Show me and I will remember.
Involve me and I will understand."

Chinese Proverb

Why then are we as Drama teachers often over looked. Take the recent website made available to our students and families across our country, this recently released website that assists parents with their choices of schools omits one of the most important aspects of education – **Drama** and furthermore the **School Production!** In the jointly written solution to our ever changing world Sir Ken Robinson writes, "In a world of rapid economic and social change, the future prosperity and well being of Northern Ireland will depend increasingly on the creativity and adaptability of all of its people. Developing these abilities in the best way calls for new approaches in education, at all levels, and new approaches to economic and cultural development." (Sir Ken Robinson, p7 2001) In, "Unlocking Creativity" we see some real strategies for creativity in education in Ireland. Meanwhile our own government here in Australia doesn't even see fit to include the Arts on the all important "My School" website.

It is the 'rhizomatic' nature (Deleuze and Guattari) of the production which we must adhere to. The possibility to entwine a community in a project is both alluring and strangely fulfilling. Sir Ken Robertson

says; “school kills creativity,” the production encourages and develops creativity and promotes the learner to utilise their facilities in a creative manner to experience a real lived and meaningful process that requires true human connectedness, so why then do we continue to be a part of the down trodden underappreciated artistic clan? I do hope that we are not like Virginia Woolf with an ‘Angel in the House’, we should have learnt from those who went before us, the angel must be killed to clear the path for progress.

What then can the Production do for a person? “The Arts provide a powerful means of sharing and celebrating student work with the broader school community. It is important that performances and exhibitions represent the culmination of a sequential learning program that provides evidence of achievement as opposed to one-off events with little relationship to deeper learning.” (Tasmanian Curriculum DoE 2008)

The School Theatre Production promotes: community connectedness, empathy, English, Mathematics, Studies of Society and Environment, Science, Physical Education, Business, Technology, Art and a special essence that breeds belonging and achievement at a multitude of levels for a diverse array of individuals. Who would have thought that a “simple” theatre production could offer all of these things, not to mention: social development such as personal hygiene, negotiations of friendships and working relationships, self control, appropriateness of behaviour? It would seem the humble Whole School Musical is doing far more than we bargained for, so why then is there flimsy support of such a beacon in education? From unfunded, unstaffed, unpaid, unsupported to special positions, funding and paid professionals – where is the equity and why has the school production been left out in the cold for such a long time, shivering behind the fog machine? I propose it’s time to open the curtain on perhaps one of the most powerful phenomena in education – the School Production. “Theater happens to be my personal favourite because in drama we pull together a wide variety of skills from different people and throw them all together. In addition to actors, dancers, and singers, a theatrical production needs good electricians, visual artists; carpenters... the possibilities do seem endless.” Hanly, S (2009) All that is required is the knowhow and support of the school community to make a positive mark in a student’s education.

The next question then must be; who should run the production? A Skilled Drama Teacher, Theatre practitioners, those of us who have Drama and theatrical skills as a background – makes sense. The mistake has often been made to allow the English teacher or the Art teacher to run the production – while some would argue it is better than no production at all, I would have to disagree, for this usually means the students don’t learn the practices necessary, or pick up bad practices from unskilled teachers. More often than not these are the teachers who feel the need to obtain the rights for the latest Broadway script. The problem with this is, high school students haven’t spent rigorous years in performance, learning the skills they require to perform at a Broadway level – hence the student is often left feeling inadequate and this is only reiterated when a professional dancer or band is brought in to compensate. It is time to bring the Production out of the dark ages, young people have so much to say and to share – we need to allow the production to be a voice. The voice allows students to express their ideas, their world, feelings and creativity. All this requires is a skilled Drama professional who can facilitate the process. After all, I don’t see too many Drama teachers lining up to run the Art Exhibition

at a school unless they are otherwise qualified and I don't see too many Drama Teachers running the school sports day unless otherwise trained or as often happens , multitasking out of necessity. If teachers from any background want to become involved in running productions then they must be supported to undertake the professional learning necessary. NB: This definitely does not include experience in amateur theatre.

Education needs to adopt the production as a part of the teacher training program, it's not expected that anyone who has a love for Math's will be able to teach the subject without any training so why then do we see fit to allow anyone to teach Production. I would argue it would be more important to train the Production teacher, for they will be required to deal with so much more in the terms of matters of the heart than the Math teacher. Perhaps the hierarchy of school based subjects' needs to shift.

'In an ever changing world where material wealth will no longer be the meaning of life, where we need interpersonal abilities and where 'ideas become the main commodity' Robinson (2001) it would be incongruous to continue to ignore the production as a means of educating sensitive, sensible, empathetic, multitasking and creative individuals. Let's face it in the 1940's and 50's for example, students learnt by rote, this was adequate when people would need to be able to work as a part of a mechanism for production, but in the post modern era of information it is not enough that students be able to regurgitate information, they need to be able to own and extricate meaning, to be able to be good and productive citizens. Rote learners of disconnected subjects will not see us into the future; connected learning is the only way forward. It is connected and community focused learning such as the production that will make a difference.

What then is an appropriate production? I once went to see a production performed by students at a well respected secondary school, and found it to promote highly inappropriate and obtusely outdated material. We should be concerned with not only what students can achieve artistically but also how they can grow by having contact with good, relevant material...What is good and relevant material? One may ask? Original, this allows for a certain degree of individualised parts for students and socio relevant material; admittedly this is not for everyone. An amazing playwright, Sue Murray has quite a few plays out there that actually deal poignantly with issues that both appeal to and are relevant to teenagers today. (And I might add - I highly recommend the plays.) It's highly enriching to write a play through work-shopping ideas as a group; these are often the best plays and allow students a sense of ownership over their work.

As a Drama Teacher and self professed *production junky*, I surmise that it's paramount to fight for your rights! The average production will take months of hard work. You will need to have a time allowance and be paid for your work, take into consideration the time to sew costumes, build sets, run technology, give skills classes, personal support, voice tuition, administration, publicity the list is endless. You will also require a decent budget so that you can buy technical equipment, scenery, costumes, props etc. Without curriculum support the production means a few dedicated staff works extremely hard for a large group of students to have an outstanding experience.

Would these funds be money well spent? I answer this question with another question: How many students do you see lining up to engage in Math's or English or even Art for that matter at lunchtime or

recess or in their own time after school? How many students willingly learn large chunks of texts, examine them, internalise them, and make real empathetic meaning of them in English, and do this all in their own time? I experience students behaving in this manner on a regular basis and it is fundamentally inspiring and refreshing that young learners value this knowledge, connectedness and skill. It is time for the education system to wake up and notice, what is one of the most under sung, enriching educational experiences in their schools – The Production.

Our students stand to reap the rewards from their involvement in original and meaningful productions. Hence our schools will gain solidarity and understanding and many social cliques will be broken down as the production is known to transcend the social group exclusiveness. It builds understanding, belonging and above all a healthy esteem in young people, this overflows into students' self awareness and conduct across the board. Shakespeare's question must therefore be answered and the answer is undeniably yes!

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As part of my research I hope to contact educators out there who, like myself who would love to see the Production take the place amongst our curriculum as the 'Production', not as 'Theatre Studies' or 'Drama' or 'Dance' but as the culmination of all of these facets and so much more. Often the Drama teacher works and teaches in seclusion absent from other teachers who possess similar backgrounds and quite often find the production to be an overwhelming part of their load. My background in Performance Studies prior to completing my Post Graduate Diploma in Education allowed me the depth and breadth of skills required of an educator involved in managing a production and yet I find it trialing at times. I would be happy to support teachers who are embarking on an original production and urge those, who have chosen a play that has been performed on Broadway to reconsider. If you would like to share your opinion/ideas, I would love to hear from you and am contactable at: merkama@southernphone.com.au

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